

The background of the cover is a painting. It depicts a pond with several pink lotus flowers in various stages of bloom. Green lily pads float on the water. To the left, a set of stone steps leads down into the pond. On the right, a tree with dark, dense foliage hangs over the water. In the upper left, a thin crescent moon is visible against a dark, cloudy sky.

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LMINALITY OF FAITH

WHEN WE LOST OUR GOD

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan

The surroundings of **Maulana Wahiduddin Khan** seem to be a marker of his advocacy for dialogue between religions and many strands within them. If there is an Arya Samaj temple next to his house in Delhi's Nizamuddin area, the liberal seat of the famed Sufi dargah and the seminary of the fundamentalist Tablighi Jamaat are in his vicinity as well. The veteran Islamic scholar whose message for peaceful coexistence between religions on the basis of mutual respect has earned him international recognition, is an important voice of sanity. At the height of the tension around the Babri Masjid controversy, Khan repudiated the extreme voices and talked of a common ground where both Hinduism and Islam could flourish side by side. He has rejected extremist tendencies within his own faith explaining that Islam offers no room for violence. Winner of many awards in India and abroad, Khan talks to **Sangeeta Purkayastha** about ways to rid the world of an engulfing religious conflict. Excerpts:

Ideally one turns to religion for peace, to seek solace, to get healed in a moment of spiritual crisis. Now the major religions of the world seem to be triggering instability, an obvious source for conflict and violence. Why? Is this happening because our idea of religion was wrong, to begin with? Or warmongers, hegemonists are using religion?

According to my studies, the basic reason for this instability is the failure in reapplying religion to modern



Peace in the wisdom of God

times. I have recently published a book called *The Age of Peace*, which deals with this subject. All religions, including Islam, were propagated in the distant past, which was an age of primary civilizations, of spontaneous instincts. Those societies were swayed by primeval impulses. That age was marked by constant fighting and conflict, the sword ruled over everything else. The modern instruments of negotiation were yet to be evolved. There were no modern facilities as they exist today.

I think the reason for continued fighting today is unawareness of the present age and its dominant notes. All those who are engaged in violence, including Muslims, are unaware of the changes brought about in the modern times. The present age is an age of peace. That is, now being peaceful is not simply a behaviour, rather peace has become power. Today's technology and modern developments have accorded peace the position of power. However, those who are

fighting are quite unaware of this fact. For example, if you establish an educational system or an industry, it would prove to be a source of power for you. In the previous ages there used to be political empires, but now there is no need to establish any such empire. In our times, the Japanese have, for instance, established an industrial empire and Australia has established an educational empire. All these 'empires' were made through peaceful struggle and peaceful activism. I am trying to make people aware of this fact. Let me give you an example. The Japanese were involved in violence during the Second World War. At the time, they believed that weapons constituted power. But when their weapons failed to yield a positive result, a rethinking took place within Japanese society: they discovered that there was no need to use arms or be involved in fighting. They re-planned along peaceful lines and encouraged scientific education and industry. In this way, the Japanese could achieve their goals peacefully without waging wars anymore. A pacifist Japan has achieved much more than through its long military campaigns. Peace has paid Japan a greater dividend than the gruesome wars it had fought. I have established this fact in detail in this book. Thus, peace is power and if you can achieve everything through peace, then why engage in war? The reason people are still perpetrating violence is on account of their own unawareness of the nature of the present age; their actions are not supported by religious teaching.

Do you believe anyone advocating violence in the name of faith is committing an offense against God?

Yes, there is no doubt about it.

Advocating violence is tantamount to fighting against God Almighty. This is because, according to the Quran, one of the names of God Almighty is as-Salam, which means peace. This means that God Himself is peace. The whole universe consisting of stars, planets and

galaxies is controlled directly by God. And in these places, we see, only peace prevails. There is peace in the galaxy, in the solar system and in the forests. So, God Himself is peace and He acts through the peaceful method. So, there is no doubt that those who resort to violence are committing an offense against God.

To the world, India has always been known as the land of spirituality. This is where the Sufi faith flourished, Vaishnavite philosophy took root, the 16th century Bhakti movement preached accommodation and tolerance. Ashoka, Akbar and Gandhi made tolerance and peace the mainstay of their political ideologies. Now why are different strands of religion taking on an intolerant edge increasingly? Is no synthesis possible anymore?

According to my analysis, India was a land of spirituality and is a land of spirituality. The problem is that now we are living in the age of democracy. It is democratic politics that has created problems. This observation is made by Jawaharlal Nehru in *The Discovery of India*. He says that before the advent of democratic politics, there was no religious violence in India. But since the time India began to follow the patterns of democracy, people realized the benefits of vote-bank politics. They want to keep voters within their fold. Thus, if we see the kind of situation mentioned by you, it is due to the expediency of democratic politics and not because religion teaches us to be intolerant.

The intolerance we see in India can be explained in terms of the exigencies of electoral politics. We are still not an educated society in the sense America is. They know how to live within the parameters of a democratic culture. We have not reached that level; even our best institutions do not match their standards. Despite our advances in education, we still have not adjusted to the culture where tolerance is sacrosanct, nonnegotiable. So, we are paying the price for our inadequate and sub-standard education.

All scholars point to a common core of all religions, they say every faith essentially says the same thing. Do you have a message to offer, a new doctrine, a new Din-e-Ilahi that encompasses all religions, which everyone can accept?

This is a good question.

My formula is quite different in this regard. I do not believe that there are no differences between various religions. According to me, difference is only natural. You cannot take away diversity or differences from life. One man is different from another, no two things are alike. Therefore, the statement 'All religions are one' is not valid. It is a fact that there are differences between religions as there are differences between secular ideologies. For example, you cannot say that socialist economy and capitalist economy are one and the same, nor can you say that a controlled economy and a free economy are same. Differences exist between secular disciplines, but we see to it that disputes are settled through dialogue. How do we do that? The answer is peaceful coexistence. There are differences among countries, but they do not go to war every day. Right? There are differences among secular systems, but they maintain peace. This is because they have adopted a very natural principle, that is, of peaceful coexistence. We have to adhere to the same principle in the field of religion as well. The formula which is successfully applied in the secular field should be applied to the religious field also. There are some people who are trying to establish peace between religions by advocating the formula of mutual recognition or mutual acceptance. This formula is, according to my experience, unnatural. The principle I follow is based on mutual respect. This formula has also been adopted by people in secular disciplines. This essentially says: 'Follow one and respect all'. Others say: 'I am right, you are also right'. I think this is unnatural. I think that there are differences between religions, so I will follow my religion and you will follow your religion, but both of us must pay

respect to each other.

There are certain ideas and values common to all religions, but there are also differences between them. Due to this, it is not enough to simply emphasize the commonality between religions; there should also be a principle guiding us to live peacefully alongside others with whom we have differences. This principle makes sense to both secular and religious spheres: follow one and respect all.

Do you have a message to offer which people of all religions can accept?

We have to adopt the policy of delinking. If there are differences, we should put them on the negotiating table. We must settle differences through peaceful negotiation and not by violence. At the same time, people of different religions must forge relationships with each other in the field of industry, education and social service. In these fields we have to adopt an open policy and as far as differences are concerned we have to accept dialogue as a means to resolve conflicts. This you can term as the 'policy of delinking'.

You are an eminent Islamic scholar and you have spoken out against extremism again and again. How do you explain the present state of Islam?

The violence committed by Muslims is not due to Islamic teaching. Islamic teaching is not based on violence or war. There is a verse in the Quran: *As-sulh khair*. (4:128) This means that in every situation peaceful settlement is the best. If there are differences, you should try to settle them peacefully. This is what Islam tells us. The problem, however, is that those Muslims who are engaged in fighting are unaware that times have changed and now peace is the most powerful means of doing anything. The present militancy and extremism is because of unawareness among Muslims.

How do we explain the violence being done by ISIS in the name of Islam?

According to my knowledge, not a single Islamic scholar has accepted the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as a genuine state. All Islamic scholars have unanimously rejected its statehood. Thus, the case of ISIS is one of revolt and not a case of Islam. They staged a coup, formed a state and have used the name of Islam. But their state is not Islamic; rather it is a coercive and despotic state. The entire community of Islamic scholars has rejected its validity.

I believe that there will come a time when the majority of Muslims will adopt the peaceful ideology of Islam. ■



Merging spaces

